

## **Brokeheart Mountain: Reflections on monotheism, idolatry and the Kingdom**

Presentation for the annual COV&R Conference held in St Mary's University, Twickenham, London, 8-12 July 2009. This talk was given as part of a day of discussion with distinguished Muslim scholars concerning the "fearful symmetries" between Christianity and Islam

In August 2006, I had the pleasure of visiting the Holy Land as part of a small interfaith pilgrimage. The plan was for a group of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim lesbian and gay shapers-of-opinion, well schooled in, and committed to, a recognisably orthodox version of our respective theologies and with heads at least slightly above the parapet, to visit significant places for each of our traditions. We would read our sacred texts with each other *in situ* as we attempted to help each other discover what it might mean to be truly Jewish, Muslim or Christian and gay, and how we could support each other and others in similar situations. In the event, I'm sad to report, we were unable to find a gay Muslim religious leader who could safely stick his or her head above the parapet for this purpose, so our pilgrimage became an exercise in Jewish-Christian sharing. It was for me, even so, a wonderfully enriching experience. The end of our pilgrimage coincided, deliberately, with World Pride, held that year as a rather small affair in Jerusalem, where we met up with some of our more liberal coreligionists, now indeed from all three backgrounds. And it was in the run up to World Pride in Jerusalem that we discovered the true unity of our religions. For the Chief Rabbi, the Grand Mufti, the principal representatives of Orthodox, Protestant, and (owing to slow bureaucratic communications) last but not least, Catholic religious authority all joined together with varying degrees of fury and conviction to condemn and repudiate the presence of sodomites desecrating the Holy City, begging the secular authorities to keep us away.

As the Israeli press pointed out, it was the first time in anyone's memory that the notoriously factional and divided religious authorities of Jerusalem had managed to agree on anything. And it brings me to why I consider it very appropriate to be conducting our discussion today under the heading "fearful symmetries". The way in which our different religious leaderships manage to come to unity around this single issue, one which is either entirely marginal to, or not present at all in, our respective sacred texts means that to my mind any claim which our groups make about how peaceful they are, how they only desire the good of humanity, and how firmly committed they are to love of God and neighbour should be taken not with a pinch, but with a bushel of salt. Frankly, the unity of religious leaders is more often a nightmare than a dream: a fearful symmetry indeed.

And of course it was the fact that we were in a secular state marked by the rule of law that offered us safety against such outbursts of religious unity. Gay Christians living in Christian – dominated countries where the rule of law is tenuous like Jamaica or Uganda are not at all safe from bands of the roving righteous. Any more than are gay Muslims in countries like Iraq, or Iran. Here is a very clear area where the relationship between religion and murder is not merely academic.

In September of 2006, a month after the events I have just described, Pope Benedict gave a speech in Regensburg. His gaffe and the intemperate reaction that ensued temporarily occluded the sensible point he had sought to make. Nevertheless, the whole kerfuffle put the issue of the relation between faith and reason firmly on the agenda at the centre of discussions between Muslims and Christians. Several Muslim scholars responded to the Pope’s remarks indicating the importance of reason for them, and since then the Holy Father has returned to the theme on a number of occasions, most recently on his trip to the Holy Land earlier this year.

Since 2006 people like me have been listening out to see if we can hear from our religious authorities anything suggesting that what they mean by reason and the way it interacts with faith might have the slightest impact on their own attitudes, or the attitudes of their followers, towards the sodomites in their midst who have recently provided so endearing an occasion of passionate unity. In other words: all our authorities seem to agree that faith is reasonable, that reason illuminates faith, and that faith purifies reason. But just as soon as anyone suggests that this might lead to any actual learning about something, and wonders why in the, small, unimportant, and no doubt “icky” sphere of matters gay, it seems not to, then the same religious leaders either turn remarkably quiet, or weigh in to claim that this particular form of violent hatred with its stereotypical accusations is not violent and not hatred but is the direct fruit of a divine teaching and so off the table as regards learning.

Put this another way: either the conversation about faith and reason we are supposed to be having is simply self-innocenting cant, the never-to-be-drawn ideological drapes of a pretty religious summer house; or it actually means something, in which case it must be able to be cashed out in a form that might be described as a faith-inspired anthropology of learning. And that faith-inspired anthropology of learning must be capable of being set out in a way that has historical incidence.

So, I thought that I might engage in a bit of equal opportunity hatefulness by insisting on lowering the tone of our discussion concerning monotheism, idolatry and the Kingdom of God to the level of engagement with the small, ultimately rather unimportant, apparently “icky”, but nevertheless persistent piece of the human puzzle that currently goes by the name of “gay”.

And I would like to do this, hoping that we can avoid some of the passions that the subject arouses, by means of a hypothetical test case. By that I mean something that starts with the question “what if?” In other words, I don’t want to waste your time and attention today with a discussion of whether or not it is *true* that being gay or lesbian is some sort of defective state in a humanity that by its nature is intrinsically heterosexual, or whether it is not rather true that being gay or lesbian is simply a regular and non-pathological minority variant in humanity. That is a discussion for elsewhere.

What I want to do instead is to pose the hypothetical question: “Let us imagine, hypothetically, that it *were* true that being gay or lesbian is a non-pathological minority variant in humanity. How might this impact the discussion concerning the relationship between faith and reason in our respective religious groups?” In other words, I’m proposing a test case: what would it look like for *our* group to undergo some sort of learning in this sphere *on its own terms*?

That phrase “on its own terms” is the one that is important to me here. I’m absolutely not interested in some general theory of secularization, which disdains the particular ways of doing things of particular religious groups. What I am asking for are accounts of how particular religious groups come, over time, to discover things that are true about being human on this planet such that this discovery of what is true can be seen to have been the outworking of their own inner resources and then becomes a stable and creative part of how that religious group envisions the world in which we live.

Let me say that I would not dare to raise this issue here if I were able to make a triumphalist Christian point: “See, we can be self-critical and learn, unlike the Muslims who are quite incapable of self-criticism”. It is precisely because in this sphere my own religious group, the Catholic Church, which I love, and of whose central tenets I am an ardent exponent, has thus far proved incapable of applying to its own teaching what it says aloud to others, that I feel able to raise the matter. Can equal opportunity hatefulness become the grounds for equal opportunity self-critical learning?

So, if I may, I propose to sketch out a hypothetical argument concerning how, in the light of Girard's mimetic theory, which is the ground of our meeting here, it might be the case that the Catholic faith could find itself at home with the sort of faith-inspired anthropology of learning that I have mentioned. And at various points I will ask the open-ended question, to which I do not expect a quick answer: can you imagine, hypothetically, how Muslims might imagine an analogous process? Does the process of learning look entirely different? And if it does look different, what do you mean, in practice, by the relationship between faith and reason? What is your faith-inspired anthropology of learning?

So to my sketch of a hypothetical argument to show how Catholics, for reasons which are internal to, and flow from, the sources of our faith, might hypothetically be able to learn something new about being human in this sphere. My argument has two parts: what gives us permission to think that we might have something to learn here? And what might the shape of our undergoing that learning look like? Broadly speaking these two parts correspond to an understanding of monotheism and Creation, on the one hand, and the aimed-for Kingdom of God on the other. Or in other words, they are attempts to look at "where we come from" and "where we are going".

So, let me start with monotheism, creation and idolatry. I take it for granted that when we talk about God we are not talking about a god, a large and powerful member of the genus "gods" who just happens to be the only one. We are talking, in the wake of the great Hebrew breakthrough into monotheism in the post-exilic period, of God who is not one of the gods. Of God about whom it is truer to say that God is more like nothing at all than like anything that is, because God is not a member of the same universe as anything that is, not in rivalry with anything that is. God is not an object within our ken; we find ourselves as objects within God's ken. God is massively prior to us, and God's protagonism is hugely more powerful than any possible action or reaction which we might imagine. Or, in the phrase my late and beloved novice master, Herbert McCabe, used to enjoy saying: God and the Universe doesn't make two.

The question then arises of the relationship between everything that is and God who is utterly prior to it. Is that relationship something like a symptom, such that from things that are, including ourselves, we can glean something about the One who brings them into being and sustains them? And if that is the case, do we have any criteria at all for what is a reflection of God's creative will and power, and what is a defection from it? And this for me is the central point in any discussion about monotheism and idolatry: what is the criterion by which we can learn the difference between idolatry and worship? The answer which the

Catholic faith gives me is this: the reason why it is possible to be non-idolatrous is because God has given us God's own criterion for what it looks like to be non-idolatrous. And that criterion, given that God has no parts or divisions, and in every movement towards us is One, is also God. The criterion took the form of a lived-out fully human life story, that of Jesus, whose meaning was the reverse of all the human criteria that are usually brought into play in such stories. God gave, as God's own criterion for God's own power, not the power of Emperors, legislators or Priests, but the ability to occupy the space of losing, curse, shame and death without being run by them, in such a way that that space and the whole anthropological structure of human existence that depends on it, is able to be relativised. Idolatry is seen to be an involvement in the human cultural reality of death from which God longs for us to be free.

Catholic teaching further tells me that God not only gave us God's own criterion for idolatry, which is God, but as the light flowing from God's own criterion for idolatry, God gave us God's own interpretation of God's criterion for God, which we call Holy Spirit. God's interpretation of God's own criterion for God is also God, since God has no parts or divisions, and in every movement towards us is One. It is in this way, and this way only, that we can begin to engage in a process of non-idolatrous learning: that we are aware that we *do* have a criterion by which to learn, and we *do* have the possibility of interpreting the criterion, but neither the criterion nor the interpretation comes from us. In other words, it is not only the Creator who is utterly Other. The living criterion by which we can recognise the Creator and the living interpretation through which we can worship the Creator are both utterly other than, not dependent on, us; however we find that we can become symptoms of them in the same way as we are symptoms of the Creator, because they are the same protagonism as the Creator.

Now I want to say that this criterion is a very radical criterion. It suggests that in the world as we know it, we are all very markedly idolatrous, and that our idolatry is principally linked to the way in which death and its fear clouds our imaginations, our minds, our judgments and our passions. It really does mean that there is no simple way to read off from the powers and glories of this world to the power and glory of God. Rather the reverse. It suggests that our access to the power and glory of God involves us in a very radical process of re-learning about everything that is so that we can discover what it really is when no longer prisoner to our failed imaginations and to our violence which holds truth captive.

Now let us take our hypothetical test case: it has long been assumed that gay and lesbian people are simply some sort of defect of an intrinsically heterosexual humanity. This assumption has led to many different ways of dealing with the

regular, but culturally varied, presence of gay people in different societies. But the mainstream ways in monotheistic religion seem to have been to regard it as either a vice, a pathology, or some mixture of the two.

Here is the oddity: for as long as there was a certain sort of religious unity surrounding this issue, what we would now call culturally specific versions of “don’t ask, don’t tell” punctuated by occasional lynchings and burnings, there was no learning about what was actually going on in and for such people. And I should say that as far as I’m aware, there was, until the comparatively recent outbreak of fundamentalism in both the Christian and the Muslim worlds, a far greater tolerance towards this reality in the Muslim world than in the Christian one. However, it is in the modern West, as it has become possible for some people in some places not to hide this element of their being, since no longer afraid to suffer loss of life or livelihood, that it has become possible to ask non-moralistic questions about what makes people “like that” tick, what pathologies, if any, can be properly attributed to them, what dangers, if any, they pose to the general population, what forms of viciousness, if any, characterize them, and so on.

In other words, the space of science is fairly literally, in this case at least, the space opened up by the suspending of a lynch mob. For as long as the lynch mob can be persuaded not to stone, for that length of time we can start to see what is really going on in the lives of people who have traditionally been frightened to live openly, lest they become the victims of an outbreak of religious unity.

So, what I want to say very briefly is that here we have the beginnings of an understanding of how Catholics might learn something which flows from the central resources of our faith. The criterion we have for the relationship between our Creator and ourselves is a self-giving victim-unto-death who occupies the space of death for us so that we may no longer attribute anything sacred to it, but instead be able to inhabit it ourselves in such a way that it loses toxicity; because of that, we are able to question any type of ganging up of all against one, of all against some obvious wrongdoer, and say: “Stand back! Might it not after all be the living image of God, rather than a corrupting and seditious evildoer, that we are seeking to kill?”

This does not of course resolve the matter. And I want to make that very clear indeed. The mere fact that someone, or some group of people is liable to being, or actually is, the object of mob violence, does not *ipso facto* mean that that person or group is either innocent, noble, sane, or anything else. It does mean that humans who think they are in some way pleasing God by putting such people to

death are mired in idolatry, and can never learn anything about themselves or other people while this is their solution to their group problems.

So here I am talking about the anthropological condition of possibility of our learning. And I want to claim that it is a perfectly reasonable development of Catholic Christian self-understanding to say that God's criteria for God, the life and self-giving up to death of Jesus revealed as of God in his resurrection, acts, in this sphere, as in all others, as a brake against our unwillingness to learn by suggesting that if we find ourselves gathering together in the name of God against some group of people, then the chances are we are being idolatrous, and that it is not until we subtract ourselves from such fake and easy forms of unity that we will begin to be able to ask ourselves about causality in a non-idolatrous way.

It is because of this that I do not at all respect the religious authorities of my own Church when they avoid the question of whether their own characterisation of gay and lesbian people as objectively disordered is true, but instead seek to create religious unity with other like-minded religious leaders at the expense of the possibilities of freedom and flourishing of gay and lesbian people. I think, and this is but one instance among many, of the Catholic Bishops in California who successfully made common cause with Mormon religious leaders, with whom it is not at all clear that we have a common understanding of the criteria for idolatry, to have gay and lesbian Californians stripped of their right to civil marriage.

Or again, I think of one Catholic Archdiocese in the United States that was perfectly happy to take part in ecumenical gatherings alongside Christian denominations which deny such things as the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, that Mary is properly called the Mother of God, the existence of the sacramental priesthood, and other first order Catholic teachings. However, when the Metropolitan Community Church, whose members tend to have a rather Catholic-friendly understanding of basic Christianity and its liturgical life, but which is predominantly gay in its composition, was admitted to the group, the Archbishop ordered the ecumenical links to be broken. What good does it do to have the Vatican explain to Catholics that there are different orders of teaching, of different levels of importance for the life of the Church, when an Archbishop's inability to contemplate honest disagreement concerning a low order teaching can so easily trump a charitable ability to contemplate honest disagreement with much higher order teachings? But that's chewing over the Christian cud.

My first set of questions to our Muslim sisters and brothers is this: supposing that we can even be having this discussion at all, do you understand there to be a criterion at the anthropological level by which God enables us to understand anything about God? How does that criterion avoid the charge that it is idolatrous? How does that criterion work to create an anthropological condition of possibility for us to learn anything real about the world we live in? And how might this be applied to the possibility of our learning that gay and lesbian people are simply a regularly occurring non-pathological variant of human being rather than a defective form of an intrinsically heterosexual humanity?

Please note that I am not asking for an answer concerning the truth of the matter at hand. I am asking for a consideration of the hypothetical framework within which a discussion about the truth of the matter at hand would be seen by you as being consonant with, flowing from, your own understanding of the resources made available to you by Islam. And I am doing so alongside a parallel offering of a sketch of a Christian response to the same question.

The second part of the argument that I want to develop is that of the end game, the Kingdom of heaven: what it is that we think God wants us to live for, to build, together, and how we do it. That the One God wants us to be one as God is One is not in doubt. But the shape of that one-ness, and the criterion for it, are hugely in question. There is all the difference in the world between the sort of one-ness that is the product of shared hatred over against an “other” who is being annihilated and the sort of oneness that is made available by someone humiliating themselves, offering themselves as a peace offering whose gesture is then gently received by all present.

The reason I ask this here is because the question of the Kingdom and the sort of unity that is envisaged by it is intrinsically tied to the question of Creation and to the question of learning. In other words, there is an intrinsic relationship between the project of which we are symptoms, the Creation, and the project in which we are becoming active participants, the Kingdom. My question is: what is the shape of our being opened out from one to the other? Or: what kind of transformation of us does our recognition of God’s criteria for our idolatry lead us to, and what kind of pathway or direction does God’s interpretation of God’s criteria open up for us?

The reason why this is important for the hypothetical case that I have put before you is as follows. Just because something *is* doesn’t automatically mean that something is *good*. So the fact that we find ourselves suspending our lynching of a particular group of people owing to our idolatry being challenged by God’s

criterion of Godself towards us, doesn't automatically mean that the members of that group are simply good and innocent. It does mean that before they are anything else, they are like us, and that therefore, in the space of the suspended lynching we can begin to learn something about what we and they really are.

But whether something is good or not has to be seen by its fruit over time. This is part of what is meant by the Creation: what is *is* in as far as it gives glory to God, gives witness to the power of which it is a symptom. It is perfectly possible to point to things and see them just as tending to nothing at all, being futile, vain, having no possibility of flourishing. We can all, under certain circumstances, tell the difference between self-destructive forms of human being, leading to nothing but misery and sadness, and other forms of human being which seem to light up something more than themselves, have a point, a purpose, a "what for".

And this is the question that seems to me to be central to a faith-inspired anthropology of learning in the sphere of matters gay: can we learn that the "just is" is part of a "what for", or are we left saying: "well, we're not going to stone you to death, even though we know from our sacred texts that we should, but on the other hand you aren't really a full part of creation, just a function of futility. Anything less than a heterosexual relational pattern is part of vanity and doesn't give glory to God."

So how, hypothetically, might a Catholic learn that the "just is" of being gay or lesbian is indeed objectively part of a "what for"? And here I am of course attempting to sketch out a Catholic version of a faith-inspired anthropology of learning. Part of the answer is by spending time in the space of the suspended lynching. Our belief is that God's criterion for God is a forgiving human victim, and thus that those who recognise God breaking into our typical victim-creating circles as the victim who forgives us are able to learn not to be frightened of being in that place ourselves. Which means that we can lose our fear of being wrong, of being shamed, and of losing. And losing the fear of being wrong and of being shamed is an indispensable part of learning anything at all. The safer you feel about the consequences of getting something wrong, the freer you are to dare to learn about getting it right.

So God's living criterion for God – the human victim Jesus of Nazareth - is intrinsically linked to God's living interpretation of God's Criterion for God – the power of forgiveness which flows from Jesus and opens up creation. Or in other words, a regular pattern of desire has as its protagonist the victim in question and flows towards any who will receive it, and this pattern of desire, which we call

Holy Spirit, teaches us what is God's will for us, showing us what it is really to be Children of God.

Now what is claimed, and I think that Girard's thought enables some absolutely vital precisions to be made in this sphere, is that since we find ourselves having the pattern of desire that is run by rivalry, vengeance and fear of death undone in us, we are also able over time, and despite many errors, to learn to distinguish between those patterns of desire which are part of the new building up which is "for something", and which are not idolatrous, and those patterns of desire which are the remnants of those patterns from which the ability to undergo death in advance and dwell in it peacefully has freed us. Precisely because we do not need to justify ourselves, and we are not expected to be innocent, merely penitent, we can find ourselves wanting to respond in love to the love and forgiveness we have received.

This in fact has been my experience, as it has been the experience of many gay and lesbian people who have put themselves through what are known as "ex-gay programmes" only to come out at the end as gay as ever. Over time it becomes possible to detect what are the rivalistic, compulsive, self-destructive patterns of desire which do indeed run gay and lesbian people as they run everybody else, and of which gay and lesbian people, no less than anybody else, need to repent, on the one hand; and on the other hand to detect what is the solid "given" of sexual orientation which is the condition of possibility of our being able to love as humans at all, and to repent of which would be a form of kicking the Creator in the teeth. It was enormously important to me personally when Girard showed how the same mechanism is responsible for all the pathologies of desire, and is relatively independent of the gender of the subject or the object of desire. He exposed the nonsense of claiming, for instance, that Dostoyevsky suffered from "latent homosexuality" merely because although the object of his sexual desire was clearly female, the significant and obsessive drivers of his relationships were male. And this made perfect sense to me as soon as I read it since there was not the slightest tinge of the erotic in my experience of a phase of deep jealousy of a woman who had married a man I loved. Not for one moment did the experience make me a latent heterosexual!

This is a tiny little distinction concerning desire. The distinction between saying on the one hand "all human desire is intrinsically corrupt, and so nothing can be learned from its vagaries about what humans are really meant to be"; and saying on the other hand "human desire is very seriously corrupt, yet as humans find themselves brought to life by God's self-interpretative desire, which is God, they can indeed find elements that are of the Creator and which may yet learn to tend

to the Creator”. It is this distinction that, at least within a Catholic framework for a faith-inspired anthropology of learning, enables science to be born.

In this particular sphere it enables us to answer the “just is” question a little more fully: here we are talking not merely of something that “just is”, but of something which has at its root a “what for” which has so far not been recognised or allowed to flourish. So the question is: can we dare to allow the attempts at flourishing, with a view to finding out, over time what the “what for” looks like when it is allowed to be?

Now the beauty of Church teaching concerning marriage is that it does firmly offer a sense of a very particular and narrowly defined form of sexual love over time that is open to procreation as being non-idolatrous, and as being capable of bearing some sign not only of the “just is” but also of the “what for”. Though it must be said that the principal stress of the teaching has been on the giving of each one to the other in love unto death rather than the capacity for procreation. It is the Baptismal living out of love unto death that makes a marriage sacramental. Jesus himself suggests the idolatry of being too concerned with procreation when God is infinitely able to create<sup>1</sup>.

So the question becomes: is it conceivable, as we discover that heterosexuality is not the normative, but rather the majority human condition, that we also discover that there are forms of relationship between gay and lesbian people that have a “what for” that is proper to them? In other words are there certain regular sorts of flourishing which we can see in this sphere which point to more than themselves, which delate, give away, point up, something about God? And what would the criteria for such flourishing be?

Well, I don’t want to go any further with this now, since all I wanted to do was set up the second part of the hypothetical Catholic framework for a faith-inspired anthropology of learning. This is a way of saying that for a process of learning to be recognised as leading to something true about being humans, it is not enough to note the existence of something, or even to declare it “OK” on merely empirical grounds. The element of the “just is” has to be linked to some sort of “what for” if we are to be faithful to belief in the Creator. And I have begun to set out some of the dimensions of how that link might be explored. If followed, it would lead to a situation where it would be perfectly obvious to people reading the texts of the Bible which are currently used to attack gay people that what are being condemned are idolatrous cultic rites, and that these have no more, and no

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 22, 23-33.

less, to do with the fairly stable class of people which we call gay or lesbian than they do with everybody else.

So my question for our Muslim sisters and brothers is this: what would be the critical process, consonant with Islam, and flowing from your own resources, by which you explore the link between the “just is” and the “what for” of Creation? In the, as I say, hypothetical case, that gay and lesbian people are not defects from an intrinsically heterosexual human condition, how would it become self-evident to any thinking Muslim that such people cannot, by the mere fact of being who they are, be considered liable to any of the loopholes, exceptions, to the rules of peace and love which all our sacred texts seem to leave open. It is those loopholes that give permission to kill.

Please excuse me if, by forcing an “icky” topic on your ears I have made it difficult to attend to what I hope is a discussion that is worth our while undertaking regardless of which specific area of possible learning we explore. I do not, as I say, expect a quick answer to any of the questions I raise here. And I am well aware that the reactions which some of you could face by raising such questions yourselves might be a good deal more than “icky”. My plea is: if we are to have serious conversations about the interplay of faith and reason in our lives, then please do not let us engage in ritual self-congratulatory window-dressing. Please can we allow ourselves to be questioned by hard cases which demand from us that we set out a faith-inspired anthropology of learning that has incidence in our lives.

I began my talk with my visit to a Holy Mountain, Mount Sion, and I hope to return one day, if not to the earthly, then to the Celestial Jerusalem. If any of us, Christians, Muslims, Jews are able to make a pilgrimage together in which gay and lesbian people are to take part, fully ourselves, and fully in need of all the same graces as everybody else, it will only be because we will have undergone an arduous process of learning in which we will all have been stripped of different sorts of idolatry. A painful and disorienting process, for it is our hearts that will have become detached from forms of belonging to which they ought not to have been attached so as to become aligned with something imperishable. On the way we will have learned things about being human that none of us knew before, and what we know will be real. Our unity will no longer be that inspired by the fierce guardians of idolatrous righteousness. Our bonds will have become those of the broken-hearted.

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